

Interview with Nicoletta Janson & Ronald Janson

Location: Northern Michigan University LRC 114, Marquette, Michigan

Date: July 9, 1999

START OF INTERVIEW

Interviewer (I): LRC 114. It is July 9, 1999. The time is 11:20 in the morning. I'm conducting an oral history interview with two individuals who shortly identify themselves. Alright. My first question is could you first identify yourselves, your names, and each one of you give some background information about yourself, where you were born, how you came to Northern, where you grew up, your educational or career backgrounds? I'll let you decide which one wants to go first.

Nicoletta Janson (NJ): My name is Nicoletta Janson. My maiden name was Nicoletta Ganga [?]. I was born and raised in Iron Mountain in the Upper Peninsula and I came to Northern in 1948 when I married my husband Ronald Janson and my education background, I attended University of Michigan, I went on to become an elementary librarian after we left Marquette and I was a librarian for 22 years after my children were in about the 6th grade, I think, I went back to work. And Ron?

Ronald Janson (RJ): My name is Ronald Janson. Also from North Muskegon, Michigan. Originally from Norway. One of the main reasons for my attending Northern was because I was from the UP and because I had various jobs, I had been in the military and I came out of the military, had various jobs. Some of them I requested because they were hard and I wanted to better myself so I decided come to Northern. I came here in 1947 and shortly after one year I married Nicoletta, we returned to campus and after 11 months we had a child and my wife worked for Michigan Bell Telephone Company and supported me while I went to school. Without her I probably would never have graduated. I attended, I got a job in the Lower Peninsula in a small town called Holton, Michigan. I worked there for two years, was a principal for a year and a half of those two years. Moved to North Muskegon, Michigan and taught industrial arts for a period of 35 years. I also taught drivers training and assisted in football program. I attend West Michigan University, took a long time I can't give you the particular dates but it took me a long time get through, because I married at that time I had three children, and eventually ended up with a master's degree from Western, and I've taken classes in various capacities, attended seminars in the foundry industry and did a lot of construction work. Mostly taught drivers' training in the summer time.

I: You mentioned a branch of the service. What branch was it?

RJ: I was in the U.S. Navy.

I: U.S. Navy. And you mentioned you were a librarian?

NJ: Yes.

I: That's public library?

NJ: Yes. In our elementary school at North Muskegon, Michigan also. I have to tell you one humorous little thing. When Ron graduated, it must have been the president who asked the wives of the graduating seniors to please stand and conferred on us the PHT: Putting Hubby Through.

I: Really?

NJ: Yes.

I: Wow, interesting. Okay. Could you tell me the dates again when you attended Northern?

RJ: 1947 through '51. Graduated '51.

I: And how was it that you chose to come to Northern?

RJ: Because it was, at that particular time, I think it was because, mostly because of the industrial arts teacher that was in Norway, and because I have access to the G.I. bill it gave me an opportunity, and I kind of fought about not becoming a teacher for a long period, you know, I just kind of didn't want to, I didn't think I wanted to, but several of my friends were coming up here and they talked me into coming up during one of my, I came home for a holiday, and we came up here and I interviewed with Kay Wadora [?] and took a test, a mechanical aptitude test, and scored very high on it and he more or less said that "Oh, you could do a good job up here." And so I, that's how I got here. Kind of by accident, really, I just kinda meandered in and found a home. [Laughs]

I: Great. Okay, so I understand that you stayed at Vetville –

RJ: Right.

NJ: Yes.

I: So why don't we start out by having you start talking about your experiences of Vetville, feel free to just tell us how it was, what was like –

RJ: She could add to it and - ?

I: Yeah, both of you go ahead and interchange.

NJ: Sure.

RJ: Go ahead.

NJ: Oh, well, everybody's address was 514 West Kaye Avenue, and we happened to be living in Apartment 28. And it's a, I think you would call it a studio apartment now. One main room, the kitchen on one side, a little walk through area to the bathroom, and they divided each building into three apartments, and the walls were very thin, you could talk to your friends through the apartment. You'd be like [?] a funny little story about every morning with –

RJ: Is that [?] Cliff Puckett lived next-door to us and we had the medicine chests were right next to each other and in the morning we'd be in there and you could hear him open his medicine chest and I'd say, "Hi, Cliff, how are you this morning?" So you could talk right through, cause there was only the medicine chest, that's all it was. [Laughter]

I: So what did he say?

RJ: He said, "I'm fine." [Laughter] And at night you could hear conversation, you know, we were fortunate because most people that came there had Navy – er, Army-issue bunk beds and they stacked them, you know, one on top of the other or they put them next to, like a single bed they were, and, but we had a studio couch which we had to make up every night, we had to open it up and make up the bed every night and I did some major improvements on it because my dad was very mechanical and we had a 50 gallon oil tank outside, we paid 18 dollars, approximately 18 dollars a month for heating, plus we paid 18 dollars a month for –

I: That was a lot of money.

RJ: 18 dollars a month for heat and we also had 18 dollars a month for rent we paid.

I: Oh, my God, that's an enormous amount for heating

NJ: Out of –

RJ: Out of 105 that we got from the G.I. bill. So you can see why I had to have some financial help to get through. And some of the interesting things that I did is I, you'd have to fill a one gallon can and then fill the one gallon container on the back of the furnace or the little peanut heater we had, it was only about, probably two feet wide and maybe three feet high.

NJ: A space heater.

RJ: A little space heater. So my dad had a lot of copper tubing around and he had a F_____ Model A, _____ and we ran a copper line underneath and out to the barrel, so we had a 50 gallon barrel so we could continue to have heat all the time, otherwise you had to get up in the middle of the night, at three, and fill that little gallon thing.

NJ: Through Marquette's winters.

I: 18 dollars a month, that was an enormous amount.

RJ: Yes, yes. And also we had, in the morning, everybody also had a little kind of a latch you'd pull to get in and I put a doorknob on, and there were two metal door, one on the outside and one on the in, and the morning you could see frost on the doorknob on the inside. Then in the ice box we had, we used to, they drilled a hole down through the floor and put a rubber tube down so you didn't have to drain the pan all the time, otherwise you had to take the pan out and dump it. So those were major improvements that I made.

I: When you say "ice box" it was real ice box?

NJ: It was an ice box.

RJ: Yes, ice box, right. And the way we got, we got ice delivered to us, but in the winter time we were fortunate because the middle of the metal roof on that house, or barracks, we call them barracks, and that's what they were, officers' barracks, they had a metal roof on them and when the sun come out it would melt and then it, because of the overhang it would freeze. So the ice would build up on there, probably be seven or eight inches, and then when it was a nice day we would get up there with an ice pick and we'd chip a block of it and bring it down, then we'd cover it in the snow and then we'd take it in and put it in the ice box, couldn't eat the ice but we kept it cold, you know.

NJ: Saved a little bit of money.

RJ: Yes.

NJ: I have to say that our apartment was very attractive because he was in industrial arts major. The kitchen had just sort of open shelving, and he closed the bottom part with doors and made scalloped edges and, so it was prettier than most, maybe some of the other people in houses we had not been in did, too, but, so it was nice.

RJ: Another little interesting side light is when you moved in you bought the linoleum or carpet that someone, maybe a rug someone had, and you would negotiate for that so you wouldn't have to put carpet in.

I: Oh really? Did you live in that building the whole time you were at school?

RJ: For three years.

NJ: The three years we were married while he was at school, yes.

RJ: When our daughter was born we had the crib in a, it was kind of a walkthrough closet into the bathroom, and so it was just enough room for a crib and then I built shelves in there and then we kept our towels and linens in that area, and we had a curtain on there and so sometimes she'd sneak around the corner and peak out at us and, it was very cozy and, I remember we planted morning glories in the window from Ma Perkins, got, we got a little packet of morning glory seeds from Ma Perkins on, if you call the radio station, so.

NJ: They were the most beautiful things, I wish I could get them now. So, well, we had fun and everybody was in the same situation so nobody felt poor, and so we have good memories in that apartment.

I: What do you remember? Do you remember anything other than what he just said?

NJ: Actually, they're more or less the same stuff, yes.

RJ: Well you could tell him about picking up the milk bottles.

NJ: Oh [Chuckles]

RJ: We used to collect milk bottles from the, you know, all the GIs were in the same boat, and it wasn't just us, it was everybody. We didn't own a car.

NJ: Not at first.

RJ: Until we bought a 1936 Chevy. But we'd collect all the milk bottles around, ok, and then we'd pool it, get the money and, 'cause you got 10 cents a bottle for it -

I: Oh really? That was a lot.

RJ: Or, a nickel a bottle. It was probably a nickel.

NJ: It probably was a nickel, I don't remember, it was a long time ago.

RJ: And then we buy a pony [?] of beer and have a party in the middle. Can you imagine pony of beer for all of those veterans, wasn't a whole lot.

NJ: There is a nice little story about a grocery store.

RJ: Yes, Moran's.

NJ: I think it was owned by Moran, and I think the building is still there because we took a ride, but it isn't that anymore. And he let all the GIs charge groceries and pay when you got your check.

I: Oh, really?

NJ: Yes. And he said he was never stiffed by a single vet. So he'd never lost a penny.

I: Wow, that's neat.

NJ: But really very nice people.

RJ: And he supplied meat for the boats that came in, so that's, I mean he had very quality meat.

I: Wow, that's interesting. Well, why don't we move on then, why don't you tell us some of your favorite memories of being at Northern, things come to mind, individuals, faculty members, friends, places, classes, anything that you can think of.

NJ: Probably the fact that, after we had our child I stayed home during the day and then I would work like 4:30 to 11 or 5:30 to 11, and when Ron was finished with his classes then he took care of our child, because we certainly couldn't have afforded a babysitter maybe didn't want to anyway. So we didn't have a big social life during the regular day, or night, but we were friends with the people close around us, and they had more or less the same situation unless they didn't have children then you'd both work days, so that's one of the things I do remember.

RJ: You could talk about washing clothes and hanging them outside.

NJ: [Chuckles]. That's true, because I did have a little washing machine, the old-fashioned kind, well everybody had those, I don't know anybody who had a dryer.

I: Well describe the old-fashioned kind.

NJ: It was round and it had the ringer on it and you had to fill it with water and then you'd wash the clothes and sort of ring them into the sink, which was extra deep sink, to rinse them, and you'd have to ring them back out to get the rinse water out.

I: Well did you hand –

NJ: No, it was electric. It was electric, yes, yes.

I: Interesting.

RJ: It was a Maytag.

NJ: And then hang them outdoors. And they froze.

I: Even in the wintertime?

RJ: Oh, yes.

NJ: Sure. Or then you'd bring them in and string them all through our little bitty studio apartment.

RJ: You'd freeze them outside first then bring them in. [Laughter]

I: [Chuckles] What would you do, I mean, what would you do if they froze? I mean you'd have to –

NJ: They just were stiff.

RJ: They were stiff.

NJ: You brought them in, pinned them on the line, and they thawed and finished drying.
[Laughter] That really sounds pretty archaic, doesn't it? I guess that's how it was.

RJ: And then you had to shovel under those lines, too, remember you had to shovel that snow out. And there was no storage so we kept, you know, we had, the back seat of the car was where you kept the stroller and stuff in the wintertime.

NJ: But they did make an effort to accommodate the vets, ____ I'm sure we couldn't have found housing as cheaply as the 18 dollars anywhere else.

I: So what were your memories of classes or teachers or - ?

RJ: I was just trying to recall some of the things we did like, one time we were out – the industrial arts department was in the basement of the Longyear building, that's where the shop was. They had aboveground windows in there, probably up, walls were probably about five feet, so you could see out into the campus area, and we had an instructor by the name of Dr. Wahtera and almost everything that I learned about keeping things in order and filing and keeping a shop activity going on, something where you could have a shop cleanup detail and he organized that, I copied what he did and it did me a good stead [?] for my own career in teaching, and he was a kind of a man who would do things subtly that would impress you into disciplining yourself. We were outside one day and we're throwing a ball back and forth, just waiting for class to start, we came in and we sat down and he said, "Well, I see you people have a lot of extra time on your hands." So he assigned us another hundred questions to answer in one of his look [?] books.
[Laughter].

I: Oops. Won't play ball in front of him again. [Laughter]

RJ: Right. So he tried to keep your focus, I think was what the term we use today is, you have to stay focused, and I think that that would be a good description of the man. And then Bill Sergeant [?] and at that point McClintock was retired but he came into the school and, either was semi-retired or retired because I had only a few classes from him, but he would come in and drift around and talked to you and, it was kind of like one big family, the industrial arts department was one family, we had an industrial arts club and we had a venison dinner out in Dollar Bay [?] and Dr. Wahtera owned a cottage out there, and so we came in, parked down the road and we tried to find his cottage and we had to dig down through the snow because you couldn't see it, the roof was covered. We dug down to get into the front door of it. [Laughter] Another incident of a lot of snow was, we went in to see a L ____ program on, oh, I can't think of the man's name. Anyway, we earned a little money that time because while we were in there it snowed so much people couldn't find their cars. So we went home and got a broom and we'd go around and people would just say, "Well, we'll try to find your car for you" and we'd sweep the car off and put out your hand and got a little extra change. [Laughter]

NJ: Tell him about your working at the conventions that were held at Northern.

RJ: Oh yes, and we had the circular drive in front of Longyear building, and one of the incidents that took place there was in probably the early part of my career, maybe when I was a sophomore, there was, smoking was banned on campus, you could not smoke. And so GIs decided that was passé, they just didn't think that was right, so the GIs smoked out in front on the steps, and Dr. Tape came out and he said, you know, "It's forbidden smoke on campus" well, GIs were flicking cigarettes down there and so on and, the next day two ash trays appeared on the front steps. [Laughter]

NJ: Well, let's face it, also the GIs were older than the usual students, I mean, you were just a couple of years older, but some who were in their late 20's.

RJ: Actually it was good thing, they should have enforced it strict longer, you know, he should not have allowed us to smoke, but those things took place. Oh, we had Dr. Butler was the ag [?] teacher and we would go over to the other branch of Northern over at the prison and, he called it the other branch of Northern, and we went over there to the dairy herd farms over there, and one day we were walking down this path, and there was, the center had some brush, or bushes in it, rather, and some convicts were going from one direction, we were going the other, and we got parallel to them, and somebody said, called my name, goes, "Hey, Janson!" and I turned and it happened to be somebody from my hometown [laughter]

NJ: Not a good friend. [Laughter]

RJ: [Laughs]. Not a good friend. Well, I recognized him because of the family and he had been put in prison because he had attempted to bomb his wife with dynamite, he had dynamite stuck in his belt and was going to light it and they apprehended him and sent him to, but from that day on my life was kind of _____ because Dr. Butler would say, "Well, maybe we can go back up and visit Mr. Janson's friends up at the dairy farm" [laughter] so that was kind of comical.

I: Well, do you have any other - ?

RJ: Well, the thing that was, that we'd talk about, predominantly in the early part of Northern they were all women in this campus. When I came here they were all men because there were 900 enrolled in the school, approximately, and about 800 of those were veterans. So it was a big change, and they talk about change and I think that probably changed, GI bill actually changed our society from what it had been.

I: Now, you were probably one of the last class to be at Northern before the opening the Lydia Olson Library, which opened I believe in 1951 when you graduated.

RJ: It was being built while I was there, right. They had _____ down below the hill and they took those out.

I: Can you describe what the library was like while you were there? It was in the, wasn't it in the Peter White, no, not Peter White, Longyear or somewhere on the Kaye Hall complex, right?

RJ: Actually because of the area they were in we had mostly, our references were mostly in the department, you use a lot of reference from department. So on occasion to visit the library all I can remember is that it was basic, it had the wooden drawers that you had to look up things and Dewey Decimal System and you had to learn that and, GIs were exempt from phys-ed, that would be something that was not, you know, you did, because you had to have an hour of phys-ed, well, they said the GIs evidently had enough phys-ed so they didn't have to have any phys-ed.

I: Can you tell us about the Kaye Hall complex? That was a complex, as you know, it doesn't exist anymore including the J.D. Pierce School. What were your memories of that? Did you spend much time in the Kaye Hall complex?

NJ: Actually, I don't remember very much about it at all, I think because of our schedule, it was, having a child kept us close to home and so, I don't know what memories you have.

RJ: I think, isn't that where we had the history classes and - ?

I: Yeah, there were general classes there.

RJ: You had general classes in there, yes.

I: There was the Peter White Hall of Science and there was Longyear Hall

RJ: Yes.

NJ: Is that the one with the beautiful stairway, we saw that this morning in the lecture, that was excellent, by the way.

RJ: I can't recall any specific memories of that particular area.

I: What do you remember, if anything, of President Henry Tape? You mentioned the cigarette smoking incident.

RJ: All I can remember is a big man. And Don Bottom was the person I remember the most.

I: Can you tell us about Don Bottom a little bit?

RJ: Don Bottom was probably one of the people that I would like to have been like. He could practically, I think without question, knew every student at that particular time, and was the type of person that you could, you didn't think of him as a Dean of, you know -

I: Dean of Men

RJ: Dean of Men, you just thought of him as a nice guy, you could go in there if you had a problem, you could go to talk to him about it, and he was always jolly, always up type person. I

had the distinct pleasure of meeting his son, he was up here when I was looking at some of the pictures in the Peter White area. But he was just a very, very nice person to know. And the only thing I, Dean Carey one of things I remember about Dean Carey is that she had a policy that women could not wear red skirts, period. That was, red, you know.

NJ: I don't think I was aware of that, because I was telling this gentleman this morning that we went to a big dance, it probably was at Kaye Hall, and I had a beautiful new red formal. This would been in 1949 or '50 when Dean Carey was still here, and I didn't realize I wasn't supposed to, she didn't say anything to me, of course I was a married women, yes, and I wasn't a student. But they said she even told people who they could bring as a date to a dance, so even though you were an outsider I guess you were supposed to abide by her rules, but she didn't say anything, and I think others wore bright colors then, too.

RJ: I belong to the Theta Omicron Rho Fraternity, I failed to mention that.

I: Yeah, could you talk about that?

RJ: Yes.

I: Theta Omicron Rho?

RJ: Right. And my understanding is that the house is no longer in existence, they tore it down, and, but that was a very impressive house. We used hold dances in there. We had, the doors were huge and we'd just roll the doors back and we had the fraternity dance there, and the stairway going up had a landing that could have a five piece orchestra in it, and the storage area, what they called the dorm upstairs, had drawers large enough to put mattresses in them, the linen area, and, let me think...

NJ: Bowling alley in the basement.

RJ: Oh, they had a bowling alley in the basement and one of the, when I was initiated into the fraternity, one of the things that I had, my, there were four of us, we had to put our collars on backwards and go around all of the bars in town and, with tambourines, and try to save people [laughter] and we would collect money and then we had to get enough money to buy some beer, well it was during the Saint Patrick's, after Saint Patrick's Day, so we went to Flanigan's Bar and got the green beer and brought it back to the fraternity.

I: Do you remember Ellwood Mattson?

RJ: Yes, I do.

I: He was a member?

RJ: Yes.

I: What do you remember about him?

RJ: Oh, just one of the guys.

I: One of the guys.

RJ: Yeah, just, and George Tallumson [?] was the president when I was there, too. Ellwood Mattson was from Iron Mountain and I'm from Norway, so I knew of Ellwood and I followed what he did. And Keith Forsburg [?] was also in my class.

I: You mentioned the industrial arts club, could you talk a little bit more about the industrial arts club?

RJ: It was mostly a, we had social club, actually, it was, we met and we had a picnic and then we always had some special event, but the one that stood out mostly was trying to find the cabin, the sticks, going down, he knew where it was, we had to find it.

I: [Laughter] Unbelievable.

RJ: Yes.

I: Can you think any other favorite memories or anything else?

RJ: It was kind of, you know, after you've been in the service and you get married and you have a child and you're at school and then the Korean War broke out and I was in the reserves, so we're on a picnic down at Lake Superior -

NJ: Probably Presque Isle.

RJ: Presque Isle, probably, and we had a little portable radio, not a little portable, the portable was about this big

NJ: [Laughs] Big portable.

RJ: Nine volt battery in the back, about that big around, and we heard about the Korean War, so I had about four more months left in the reserve, my four year hitch [?] in the reserves, and so I wrote a letter to the commandant in my naval district and got out, but a guy by the name of Caperal [?] who lived in the hut next to us said, "Oh, they'll never call me back, never call me back," and we was called, he had a job already at Rapid River and they called him and he went in the Submarine Corps for the Korean War. So those interruptions sort of thing that kind of, and really what it was is you're getting your degree, and I don't think there was too much social activity, I told you about having maybe that party happened maybe once, twice, when we were there. Most people were interested in, you know, you had jobs, I worked in the college laundry, 35 cents an hour, dug ditches for the radio tower that they have out here, and the made a big deal on it, we got 75 cents an hour for doing that. And then I tore down a house from the top all the way down. Saved the logs and...A lumber company owner owned that and the building, the roof

boards, were 18 inches wide and maybe 20 feet long and an inch thick, white pine, no knots, just beautiful pieces of wood.

I: Well, I'm going to ask you an unusual question, but it's our way try to get a balanced perspective on history of Northern, were there some unpleasant memories that you have that you think kind of stand out?

NJ: I don't remember anything unusually unpleasant, truly. As Ron said, we were very busy, but we were doing alright and happy I guess, and so I don't remember anything unusually unpleasant.

RJ: I can't think any.

NJ: Isn't that unusual?

I: Any drawbacks to being at school here or something that was difficult?

RJ: The winter, but we didn't know any different from that, we're from the U.P., so the winter didn't make any difference. [Laughter]

I: Well, I guess then are there any other further final thoughts that you have that you'd like to - ?

RJ: I can't think of any... We had good friends because we're so close, I mean everybody was in, well, one of things about Vetville too that just crossed my mind is that when someone left you had to find somebody to put that into your furnace, into your heater because if you didn't it would freeze up. Well, the young man, I can't remember his name, across from us, I was home at, I was there for Thanksgiving so I was filling, before he left I said to him "Would you like me to fill your stove?" He said, "It'll be OK." Well, it wasn't because the heater broke and flooded the apartment and there was water coming out over the steps because he forgot to have somebody take care of that furnace. 'Cause I was fortunate because I had the contraption that fed right off the 50 gallon tank. Well, I can't think of anything else. Enjoyed talking to you.

I: Well, thank you Mr. and Mrs. Janson very much.

NJ: We get back up here at least once year because we have family still here, and so we haven't been into Northern a lot, just a couple times, and so was it nice to come back to Marquette.